

Welcome to the era of personal broadcasting —

Where it's entirely possible to fine-tune your very own TV or radio station



Jim Carroll

There is one thing that continues to drive me crazy about the topic of multimedia.

And that is the continued, absolute and complete ignorance that exists throughout much of the traditional broadcast world as to what is going on with the marriage of audio and video to the Internet.

Now, it used to cost a lot of money

to establish a television or radio station. And given the limited broadcast spectrum, there was probably a role at one time for groups such as the CRTC, whose mandate seemed to be careful management of a scarce public resource.

Of course, that world no longer exists. The 21st century is the era of personal TV, personal radio and personal media. Everyone and anyone is now enabled to be a TV or radio station.

And the fact is, when people are empowered with the ability to broadcast to a global audience, they will do so. Indeed, the emergence of tools like MP3, digital video cameras and Web video/audio servers, has rapidly led to an era of personal broadcasting.

To understand the future, visit Shoutcast (www.shoutcast.com), which is the embodiment of personal broadcast. It's a site where there are literally hundreds or thousands of radio stations available, each broadcasting to a particular niche audience.

Simply grab a copy of WinAmp (www.winamp.com), click on some of the links on the Shoutcast site, and tune in. Sure, the sound quality can vary and there might be annoying glitches that make it less than FM quality, but give it a few months or years — as the high-speed Internet infrastructure becomes more commonplace — and the broadcast quality will rival that of digital radio today.

And that's a key point about multimedia: people assume that online video and audio won't ever become anything more than a marginal-quality service due to bandwidth issues. If you fall into that trap, I'd invite you to think about TV in the 1950s. You had this small, fuzzy black and white image in a huge wooden cabinet. Compare that to today's 52-inch HDTV, and you'll get a sense of how online broadcast will change.

My own radio station

So Shoutcast is cool, you might say. So what?

Dig deeper into the site, and you'll discover that anyone can use the tools of Shoutcast to set up their own radio station. Is that tough? Not at all.

A year ago I converted the 1,000 CDs I own into MP3s. I can use any computer in my home to listen to the tunes and feed them into my home stereo. The CD is completely irrelevant to me.

And I've got my own Shoutcast radio station, too. Visit www.jimcarroll.com/mymusic.htm, and if I happen to be listening to music then, you can tune in. How have I done this? I've simply downloaded the broadcasting tools from the Shoutcast site and installed them on the various PCs on which I run WinAmp. The music signal is then sent to a Linux server in my basement — it's running the Shoutcast server software. This makes it available to anyone who visits the page.

So online radio is easy — what about video? Well, that's a piece of cake too. For a time, I had a RealServer (www.real.com) running on the same Linux box. That allowed me to feed a constant stream of video out to the Internet. I had my own TV station.

Complex issues

When it comes to online broadcast, no one can deny that there are extremely complex issues with the whole multimedia realm. Issues involving content, ownership, remuneration to creators, copyright and intellectual property are hugely challenging.

And those issues do need to be dealt with.

But good gosh, the "old" broadcast and entertainment industry culture is such that every time they encounter the technology of the future, they tend to lash out and sue people.

Consider my Shoutcast server. I fully expect that some day, I'll get a

threatening letter from some bonehead lawyer, representing some faction of the entertainment or broadcast industry, demanding I cease operations.

But am I really broadcasting? Not really. After all, if I invite you to my backyard, you can hear the tunes I'm listening to through speakers in my yard. But if I invite you to the Web server in my home, you can do the same thing. Is this broadcasting? Well, no — you are visiting my home, just in different ways.

Industry behind

What is infuriating about this era of personal broadcast is that there seems to be an entirely dumb broadcast mentality that still exists in Canada, with lots of folks unable to recognize that the world today has completely changed.

Granted, some of these executives are waking up. I've got to give credit to the CRTC for determining some years ago that they wouldn't regulate the Internet.

Yet, the mere fact that they thought such a thing might be possible demonstrated to me that we should kick them all out of office and replace them with media-savvy 25-year-olds.

After all, what would have happened if they came out and said they would regulate the Net? I was ready. I had configured a Linux server in my basement so that it would broadcast Anne Murray's *Snowbird* on a continuous basis using Shoutcast.

Heck, each and every one of us could visit the site throughout the day in order to get our 15% of Canadian content and maintain our Canadian identity.

We could then go off and visit any of the thousands of online broadcast sites with no idea that such a thing as Canadian content exists, and forget for a moment that there are still lots of traditional broadcasters who think they have a monopoly on the future. «

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